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TO AMEMBASSY RABAT

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 098929

FOR BLAKE

FOLL SENT ACTION SECSTATE INFO PARIS FROM TUNIS 22 MAY 73

REPEATED TO YOU QUOTE

O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 2862

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, TS

SUBJECT: BEN SALAH INTERVIEW

REF: PARIS 13513

1. SUMMARY. OFFICIAL FRENCH LANGUAGE L' ACTION PUBLISHED EXCERPTS FROM DECLARATION OF AHMED BEN SALAH ON MAY 20, AS IT APPEARED IN MAY 16 L' HUMANITE, AS WELL AS LONG REBUTTAL AND COMMENT ON HIS REMARKS. ALL OTHER PAPERS HAVE FOLLOVED SUIT. THERE IS STILL QUESTION AS TO WHETHER STATEMENT ACTUALLY MADE BY BEN SALAH, BUT MANY TUNISIANS SEEM TO ACCEPT IT AS GENUINE. END SUMMARY.

2. OFFICIAL PARTY FRENCH LANGUAGE DAILY L' ACTION PUBLISHED MAY 20 ARTICLE FROM MAY 16 L' HUMANITE CONTAINING EXCERPTS OF DECLARATION BY AHMED BEN SALAH. PIECE, SIGNED L' ACTION, MAY WELL HAVE BEEN WRITTEN BY MOHAMED SAYAH, MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS. AS- SABAH, INDEPENDENT ARABIC DAILY, PUBLISHED
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L' ACTION ARTICLE IN ITS MAY 21 EDITION AS WELL AS EDITORIAL ON SUBJECT. EXCHANGE FULLY COVERED ON RADIO AND TV, AND SINCE APPEARED IN OTHER PAPERS.

3. L' ACTION PIECE, REPRESENTING GOT OFFICIAL LINE, NOTES THAT BEN SALAH PREVIOUSLY DEFENDED WITH EQUAL VIGOR THE POLITICS HE IS NOW ATTACKING. POINTS OUT HE LEFT COUNTRY IN ECONOMIC MESS AND THAT LIFE HAS IMPROVED FOR PEOPLE SINCE HIS TIME. PURPOSE OF PIECE, HOWEVER, IS TO POINT OUT TWO " FALSEHOODS" IN BEN SALAH' S DECLARATION: (A) THAT ENFORCED COLLECTIVIZATION WAS CARRIED OUT UNDER THE ORDERS BOURGUIBA; AND (B) THAT BEN SALAH' S CONVICTION WAS THE RESULT OF THE MACHINATIONS OF BOURGUIBA.

4. REGARDING FIRST FALSEHOOD, L' ACTION ARTICLE GIVES THREE EXAMPLES OF BOURGUIBA STATEMENTS SPECIFICALLY QUESTIONING COLLECTIVIZATION PRINCIPLE. ALSO STATES THAT BEN SALAH DOES NOT HAVE COURAGE OF HIS IDEAS, SINCE ONLY DURING HIS TRIAL BEFORE THE HIGH COURT DID HE SAY THAT RESPONSIBILITY WAS HELD COLLECTIVELY BY WHOLE GOVERNMENT. NOW HE HAS EVEN GONE FARTHER AND SAID RESPONSIBILITY RESTS WITH THE PRESIDENT. REGARDING SECOND FALSEHOOD, L' ACTION PIECE QUOTES STATEMENTS MADE BY BEN SALAH DURING TRIAL AND PRINTED IN FOREIGN PRESS WHERE BEN SALAH ADMITTED HIS ERRORS. ALSO CITES FOREIGN PRESS CORRESPONDENTS' OPINIONS THAT SENTENCE WAS MODERATE. L' ACTION CONCLUDES THAT BEN SALAH HAS NOW " THROWN HIMSELF IN ARMS OF ANARCHISTS AND THUS BANISHED HIMSELF FROM COUNTRY."

5. COMMENT: WE, LIKE PARIS, STRUCK BY DOCTRINAIRE NATURE OF BEN SALAH' S REMARKS. RHETORIC HAS COMMUNIST FLAVOR VERY UNLIKE PRE-1969 BEN SALAH. FACT THAT DECLARATION APPEARED IN COMMUNIST L' HUMANITE AND THAT LE MONDE, WHICH HAS ALWAYS TAKEN INTEREST IN BEN SALAH CASE, MADE NO MENTION OF DECLARATION ALSO CURIOUS. IT IS UNUSUAL FOR TUNISIAN PRESS TO PUBLISH AND COMMEND ON ANTI- BOURGUIBA, ANTI- GOVERNMENT STATEMENT SO QUICKLY.

8. THERE ARE TUNISIANS -- INCLUDING SOME ENEMIES OF BEN SALAH -- WHO STRONGLY DOUBT THAT BEN SALAH' S DECLARATION IS GENUINE, BUT RATHER THINK IT' S GOT PLANT TO FURTHER DISCREDIT BEN SALAH OR EVEN BUILD HIM UP AS " SUBVERSIVE" THREAT AT
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TIME WHEN GOT HAS GROWING INTERNAL POLITICAL PROBLEMS. OTHER TUNISIANS, HOWEVER, SEEM ACCEPT DECLARATION AS GENUINE. MAY 22 LA PRESSE HAS EDITORIAL ON SUBJECT, REFERRING TO EARLIER PARTS OF DECLARATION NOT PUBLISHED IN L' HUMANITE. WE ALSO HAVE OTHER REPORTS THAT FULL STATEMENT HAS SURFACED HERE IN FRENCH, SIGNED BY BEN SALAH IN ARABIC. WE HAVE NOT AS YET BEEN ABLE TO OBTAIN COPY. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT TWO AND A HALF

YEARS IN PRISON CHANGED BEN SALAH' S ATTITUDES, OR THAT RHETORIC
MAY SIMPLY BE ATTEMPT TO FIND FRIENDS (AMONG STUDENT ELEMENTS
IN PARIS OR BLOC COUNTRIES, FOR EXAMPLE) TO SUPPORT
OPPOSITION MOVEMENT.

7. WELL INFORMED SOURCE HERE SAID THAT ORIGINAL DECLARATION
APPEARED IN TRACT EMANATING FROM BELGIUM. WE WOULD APPRECIATE
IT IF PARIS WOULD CONTINUE ATTEMPTS TO GET FULL TEXT, FIND
SOURCE OF DECLARATION, AND REPORT ANY SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS.
HAS BEN SALAH STATEMENT SURFACED ELSEWHERE IN FRENCH PRESS?
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